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ABSTRACT

If presented as challenges to practitioners' conventional assumptions about organizations, new views of educational administration might find greater acceptance. Practical experience shows, for example, that variance and unpredictability are phenomena normal to all organizations. Schools, too, are loosely coupled systems. Nor are decision processes rationally based--a fact that managers could use to advantage. The environment is still another misunderstood idea; the best organizations create their environments by fostering many small experiments. Conventional management theory suggests that effort and success are tightly linked, yet more effectiveness comes from scattering resources across multiple preferences. A principal might press for a desired result in several areas, including materials, training, and time allocations. Coworker congeniality is a fifth misguided assumption; rather, organizations are incentive exchange systems where persons pursue goals by contributing to the goals of others. Nor are ineffeciencies like redundancy and overlap necessarily injurious: they are more likely to serve the organization well. Finally, goals, charts, and job descriptions are thought to concern managers more than the persons behind such items. The converse is true. Managers would be wise to consider these seven "new" views as potentially powerful tools. (KS)

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SOLUTIONS IN SEARCH OF PROBLEMS: The Experiential Validity of New Views on Educational Administration

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"New" or "alternative" views of educational administration are becoming de rigeur among the research community. With increasing frequency researchers are using alternative perspectives of organization drawn from disciplines outside of education as powerful heuristics in extending our understanding of educational organizations. Concepts such as loose coupling (Weick 1976), organized anarchies (Cohen, March, and Olsen 1972), ethnomethodology (Tuckman 1978), and phenomenology (Brown 1978) are no longer foreign to the consumers and producers of research in educational administration.

However the community of practice remains largely unaffected by these conceptual shifts. The time needed for new knowledge to appear in practice, the esoteric format these ideas appear in, and the lack of practical strategies for acting on these new perspectives are all plausible explanations for the current disparity between research and practice in educational administration. The result, if one were to view this situation as a problem in innovation diffusion and adoption, is that the potential adopters are unaware that an innovation exists; they are unconcerned.

Practitioners could be made aware of the new views and their potential utility, if they were presented in a manner which linked them to the everyday practice of educational administration. What is needed is to generate interest in the new views by highlighting their experiential validity.

Davis (1971) suggests that interesting propositions are those which speak to, but challenge, a person's assumptions about given phenomena. "People find noninteresting those propositions that affirm their assumption ground (that's obvious) that do not speak to their assumption ground (that's irrelevant), or that deny their assumption ground (that's absurd)" (Weick, 1979, p. 51.) For example, Copernicus' theory of heliocentric planetary motion was not viewed as

interesting but rather as disreputable, because it denied the assumption ground upon which the Ptolemaic system was based. Yet modern day astronomers are intrigued by such bizarre notions as black holes, quarks, and quasars. These theories are viewed as interesting because they challenge, stretch, and enrich our basic assumptions about the behavior and composition of light, energy, gravity, and matter.

The new views of organization and administration, as baldly asserted by researchers and theorists, deny the assumption grounds of most praticing managers, e.g., the dominant image of organization as a rational, goal-attaining bureaucracy. These new views would be more readily accepted and used if they challenged conventional assumptions by contrasting those assumptions with practical experiences.

The remainder of this paper, then, will be devoted to presenting experientially valid propositions about educational organizations and relating those propositions to the new or alternative views of administration.

1. The variance in response, productivity, and performance occasionally manifest by individuals, subgroups, and subunits is not a localized phenomenon. Instead it is a generalized characteristic of organization. Variance and unpredictability are the norm, regularity and uniformity the exception.

Managers expect uniformity; they seldom get it. Subordinates and co-workers deviate from predicted and desired courses of action more often than not. What is predictable is the unpredictability of managing educational organizations, the difficulties inherent in controlling, cajoling, and compromising with a large number semi-automous, self-willed stakeholder groups.

Consider the following examples of unplanned and unexpected events occurring in the life of a school principal:

- Several students are suspected of being involved with drugs; the police want to search their lockers.

- o The English department wants to enlarge the required courses for graduation to include courses in writing as well as literature.

- o A state commission has recommended computer literacy courses for all students.

- o A recent directive from the central office requests action be taken to reduce the dropout rate.

- o A parent group is upset over the presence/absence of sex education courses.

- o The fall achievement tests haven't arrived yet and the testing day is tomorrow.

To describe schools as loosely coupled systems is to describe conditions such as those listed above. It is not enough to view instances of loose coupling as aberrations, dysfunctions, or temporary lapses. School administrators will be less frustrated and more effective. if they begin to see the organizations they manage as loosely linked, and appropriately so.

2. Decision processes seldom attain the rational ideal described in most administration texts. In fact, few decisions are ever arrived at through a sequential process of goal setting, data collection, and assessment of alternatives. In most cases decision processes reflect the mix of participants, available solutions, and problems. <u>What's interesting about organized anarchies is the organization not the anarchy.</u>

Managers quickly learn that they seldom have the time (or the inclination) to make decisions based on rational appraisals of empirically-validated alternatives. Real life conditions just are too ambiguous, conflictual and hurried. Instead managers find themselves in confusing situations where they are pressed for decisions they have little confidence in, where political considerations outweigh substantive issues, where tough problems reappear time and time again and never seem solved.

Consider the experience of planners during the nascent days of the National Institute of Education:

> Nearly five months had passed and five drafts of procedures had been developed. Each proposal had been altered incrementally to eliminate features displeasing to various interested parties. There was still no clear sense, however, of whether the product was improving, what an acceptable product might look like, or who would decide when the proposal was "finished." There was agreement on the need for a set of procedures, but there was no indication that a decision was nearer at hand than it had been at the beginning of the undertaking. (Sproull, Weiner, and Wolf, 1978, p. 175)

What's debilitating is the frustration of perceived confusion and the expectation shortfall. What's interesting is the potential utility to be gained by asserting an alternative structure or order to organizational decision processes. Cohen, March, and Olsen (1972) suggest that decision processes in institutions of higher education are determined by the interaction of streams of participants, solutions, and problems at decision opportunities. This more complicated view of decision processes affirms the day-to-day experience of managers and offers them a powerful tool for managing organizational decision.

3. Most managers are taught that environmental forces and conditions will impinge on organizational activities. Few managers are taught to recognize the extent to which <u>organizational activities create environments which later constrain them</u>.

Neophyte managers are urged to "scan the environment," to take into account external impact factors before acting. To the contrary, Peters and Waterman (1982) suggest that excellent companies have a "bias for action" and foster numerous small experiments. The result, combined with a penchant for being "close to the customer," are organizational behaviors which seemingly carry the company to success.

> The best companies are pushed around by their customers, and they love it. ... Almost all early IBM innovations, including the company's first computer, were developed in collaboration with the lead customer--the Census Bureau. The company [Allen-Bradley] was....pushed to the forefront not by its own researchers or engineers, but by its sophisticated lead users. "Boeing, Caterpillar, and GM were building their own equipment," said one executive," They said in effect, 'Get on with it or forget us.'" (Peters and Waterman, 1982, p. 195)

Educational organizations, too, create their own environments. The actions, or lack thereof, of colleges of education with regard to enrollments in teacher training programs have left them defenseless in the face of current criticisms about the quality of teaching in American public schools. Action, even chaotic action, may be preferable to inaction (Weick, 1979); but as it removes equivocality, action creates constraints.

4. Conventional management theory suggests marshalling energy and resources around preferred activities, programs or outcomes. In fact, a more effective strategy is to scatter resources across multiple preferences.

Common sense and tradition dictates that success is directly directly related to effort expended. Therefore when success is not immediately forthcoming one directs more resources toward the problem. And in a symbolic sense this is true (see Weick, 1982, for a discussion of symbol management in school administration). But in a strategic sense quite the opposite holds.

Take, for example, the elementary principal trying to increase student achievement in basic skills, or the college dean trying to increase externally-funded research by faculty members. In each case it is not enough to assert the described outcome or even to provide inservice training opportunities. Teachers students, and parents need to see evidence of interest in and support for, increased student achievement across the range of activities emanting from the principal's office. Materials, training, consultative assistance, volunteers, time and essense allocations are all areas in which the principal needs to express and press for the desired outcome.

5. Conventional views of management are built around assumptions of co-worker cooperation and congeniality. In practice, their suborindates are more likely to be dissimilar than similar, competitive than cooperative, contentious than contented.

Most administrators don't need to be taught that organizations are goal attainment devices and that organizational participants do so out of a desire to see organizational goals achieved. The difficulty with this view (see Georgiou, 1973) is that it assumes a degree of consensus and similarity among members that seldom exists in practice. This principal's experience is not typical:

> I prefer to assume there is no consensus on anything in a school, that each individual sees the world through a unique "Swiss cheese," and the holes in one person's Swiss cheese are congruent with the holes in someone else's about as often as the planets are aligned. Occasionally, I am surprised; I am seldom disappointed. It was four years before I called for a vote in a faculty meeting. The issue was coffee. The result: some teachers wanted a common pot, some a machine; others wanted to bring their own instant coffee, tea, or soup and needed only hot water. Still others argued that coffee and tea were malnutritious drugs and should not be allowed in schools. No consensus! Teachers' feelings about education are at least as disparate as their feelings about coffee. (Barth, 1980, p. xiv)

Just as the economists ideal "economic man" and the managers ideal "rational man" proved inaccurate in describing or predicting the behavior of individuals, so the stereotypical "organization man" is rarely met at work. As Georgiou (1973) points out, the predominant perspectives of organization and management not only don't take into account the diversity of opinions, goals, and ideologies people bring to an organization, but they assume this rich diversity is somehow welded into a single personified organization.

> The whole is regarded not as the product of interaction between the parts, but as determining them. The organization is endowed with a personality while the individuals constituting it are depersonalized, role players in the service of the organization's goals. (Georgiou, 1973, p. 299)

A more realistic view of organization portrays it as an incentive exchange system, where individuals pursue various personal goals by contributing to the goals of others. As Hughes (1971) so aptly noted, "Society is interaction. Interaction involves sensitivity to others, but to some others more than other others" (p. vii).

6. Redundancy, overlap and slack are commonly viewed as wasteful inefficiencies. However, such inefficiencies also work to preserve adaptability, novelty and to buffer key organizational elements. In educational organizations sloppy structures, loose links, and constrained controls work well.

School administrators, while overtly pressing for rational efficiencies, division of labor, tasks and responsibilities, covertly (and perhaps even unconsciously) utilize the loosely coupled characteristics of school organization to maximize the success of certain subunits and buffer others from exogenous shocks.

What happens is that the building level administrator acts like a damper, "a person who absorbs, but does not pass along, variation" (Weick, 1980, p. 33). The principal initiates a variety of responses to external impact factors, from symbolic gestures (e.g., announcing a committee to study increased use of computer technology, assuring parents that desegregation will only increase the quality of their children's schooling), to targeted responses (e.g., working with central office administrators and board members to obtain necessary resources to equipment and facility update), to limited responses (e.g., forming a pilot or experimental class of tenth grade vocational education), or perhaps to no response at all.

The point to be made is that the redundancy, slack, and overlap of loosely coupled schools is not dysfunctional and, in most instances, serves the organization well. As Weick describes it, "A loosely coupled system is not a flawed system. It is a social and cognitive solution to constant environmental change, to the impossibility of knowing another mind, and to limited information processing capacities." (1980, p. 47)

7. Most managers worry about organizational goals, organizational charts, job descriptions, tasks, and responsibilities. But what they do is pay attention to the people assigned to carry out

those roles, tasks, and jobs. As Barnard (1938) so aptly put it, "The individual is always the basic strategic factor in organization" (p. 139).

This truism seemed especially characteristic of the successful companies Peters and Waterman (1982) studied. As one example, consider the following paragraph from the Dana Corporation's annual report:

> The Dana style of management is getting everyone involved and working hard to keep things simple. There are no policy or procedure manuals, stacked up layers of management, piles of control reports, or computers that block information and communication paths. ... The Dana style isn't complicated or fancy. It thrives on treating people with respect. It involves all Dana people in the life of the company. (as cited in Peters and Waterman, 1982, p. 283)

The same attention to individuals can be seen in deans and department chairs who go to great lengths to recruit "stars" or "rising young stars" for their faculties. They realize that the image, productivity and even the services of their unit depends on the individual faculty members in that college or department. The organization may be described as roles, tasks, and job descriptions, but it is enacted by people and effective managers live that everyday.

To summarize, the new views of organization and management affirm the day-to-day experiences of administrators, and the disparity between commonly held assumptions about the way things ought to be and the way things are. One might conclude that administrators:

- expect stability but live in a world that is constantly re-creating itself
- expert objectivity but live in a highly subjective, personality-intense environment
- strive for order but often succeed through disorder and serendipity

Practicing managers ought feel assured that their instincts are right and ought to be encouraged to build on the strategies they presently use, strategies which, at least implicitly, take into account the new views of organization.

These new views are potentially powerful tools. They alert us to the diversity and subtlety of life in organizations, the need for flexibility in thinking about and managing organizations, and the paucity of our present conceptual framework. Practicing administrators need to be intimately involved in the development and use of these new or alternative views, for to varying degrees, these individuals are "living" the new approaches.